



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

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## *The Failing Student*

MANY EDUCATORS and lay writers have commented in recent years upon the serious problem of school drop-outs and underachievers. Articles in professional journals and on the family pages of general periodicals are evidence of the widespread concern of parents and teachers.

We think of a "drop-out" as a student who leaves school before completing a course of study which is in harmony with his abilities. An "underachiever" is a student who does not study up to the peak of his natural capacity for learning.

What we seek is to channel these unfortunate students back into the stream so that they may receive the education they so vitally need in order to cope satisfactorily with life. Sometimes a friendly pat on the back will suffice, said Orville White in *The Educational Record*, but in many cases a strong push is indispensable.

Plenty of explanations may be put forward for failure, but failure it remains none the less. As Churchill said in one of his war-time memos: "Pray do not let it be thought that you are satisfied with such a result. If you simply take up the attitude of defending it there will be no hope of improvement."

There is one sort of excusable failure: if a research project fails it is often as valuable as an experiment that succeeds because it eliminates one method of attacking the problem as being unprofitable. Some failures in school may have similarly good results by showing that the student is headed in the wrong direction. But this reason holds good only if it is undoubtedly true.

Underachieving students are young people who could do better but will not, in spite of being warned, encouraged, punished, counselled and tutored. Some are rebels who pay lip-service to parental demands and go through the motions of classes and study, but whose minds are idling. Others look upon education as an affliction they are compelled to endure. Instead of showing lively interest and curiosity they sit neutrally as an audience and wait in a docile way for the teacher to compel them to learn.

What are the pressures that hold back certain children from the attainment reached without undue effort by others of similar ability? Some students may need counselling by the school guidance worker or by a psychiatrist to set right an emotional upset. Other students must be taught to appreciate the value of working now for future benefits. They need to set up a target at which to aim.

It should be the ambition of every parent and every teacher to so animate pupils' minds that they are always aspiring and testing their talent and developing their latent abilities.

### *The way things are*

All the ingenuity we may put forth cannot alter the nature of things. Life in today's world is of a sort to prosper only those who accept its limitations and value its opportunities and do not shirk the labour involved in learning how to handle both limitations and opportunities.

Dr. S. R. Laycock of the University of British Columbia said in an address in 1962 that the world has recently witnessed four major explosions each more important than a hundred-megaton bomb: in knowledge, in population, in space and in freedom.

More new things have been discovered in the past ten years than in the previous one hundred years, and the rate of the increase of knowledge is accelerating.

The space programmes bring us face to face with a new demand for international co-operation and control if we are to assure survival.

The population explosion, discussed a few months ago in our *Monthly Letter* on "The Hungry World", has exposed us to the still unresolved problem of helping the people in underdeveloped countries to improve their standard of living.

Finally, the freedom explosion in Africa and the East poses critical questions affecting the Western way of life. Nations with newly gained freedom which they have not yet learned to manage are bewildered and restless, enviously suspicious of better developed na-



tions, and unready to accept guidance in government and in industrial evolution.

To enable children of today to live successfully in this difficult and fretful age, said Dr. Laycock, we need to focus our emphasis on these things: a broad background of meaningful and interrelated knowledge, a well-established set of generalized habits and attitudes toward creativity, scientific method, and critical thinking, and wholesome personality growth and devotion to a set of moral and spiritual values.

How else than by building a firm foundation of elementary and secondary education are children to be prepared for this advanced thinking? How else are they to obtain the high degree of emotional sturdiness and mental maturity that they will need to stand up to the remaining years of this century?

### *The new needs*

Mere living, let alone holding a job in business, industry or agriculture, demands the ability to deal with many complicated processes and relationships. If students are to be prepared to match their hour they must be educated in harmony with the spirit of science, and yet, in spite of the excitements of its new frontiers, they must be deeply conscious of the need to preserve individual liberty and democratic institutions.

There is a fighting spirit in all of us. It is one of the agencies that keep the human race going. Our ancestors fought barren deserts, tangled forests, unkempt wilderness, and the hallucinations which peopled them with malevolent spirits. Our job is to give young people as thorough a preparation of their thought processes as possible so that they may meet unafraid and master effectively the difficulties that we cannot even imagine.

Industrialization has brought an ever increasing need for broader and higher education. In previous generations, an elementary school education was sufficient for employment in most jobs; today, due to mechanization and automation, a high school or an equivalent technical diploma is necessary for many occupations, and university-educated men and women are in increasing demand. The drop-out, therefore, faces the prospect of a succession of unskilled blind-alley jobs, and even they are becoming harder to find.

It is a rule of business and the professions to give the tools to those who can handle them. Desiring a job and being willing to work hard are no longer good enough qualifications. The uneducated find themselves obsolete before they start work.

Studies in 1963 showed that seventy per cent of Canada's unemployed persons had only grade eight education or less. Another measure of the changing education need is given in a tabulation of employment and occupation covering the years 1949 to 1959: employment in Canada increased by 24 per cent; professional employment increased by 71 per cent; skilled

employment increased by 38 per cent; white-collar employment increased by 34 per cent; semi-skilled and unskilled employment increased by only 19 per cent.

Despite this evidence of need that has been before us for many years, a brief presented to the Senate Committee on Manpower and Employment by the Canadian Welfare Council in 1961 declares that, if the present pattern of inadequate education continues, the make-up of the labour force under age 25 in 1970 will be: one-third will have left school with no more than elementary school education; another one-third will have dropped out before obtaining junior matriculation standing or its equivalent; less than one-fifth of the new entrants into the labour force will have senior matriculation standing and only some 6 per cent will have completed a university or college course.

The young person who drops out of school before obtaining the best education available to him finds that the status of all his adult life has been determined and fixed on a low level by his action. He is likely to be the first to lose his job in a slump. Studies show that he will probably move down the occupational ladder rather than up. His life will be unsatisfying, and he is unlikely to make a useful contribution to society.

### *Causes of failure*

In view of these disquieting facts, it is pertinent to ask "what is the cause of failure, drop-out and underachievement?"

Generally speaking, the student decides to drop out because he has no substantial goal in life. Our strong economy, with its blatant display of affluence and flight from hard work, fosters thoughts of enjoying ease and comfort without effort. Parents and teachers may not openly condone school failure, but they contribute to it by failing to stress the worthwhileness of working toward success.

Failing students are not necessarily mentally retarded. Some drop-outs have IQ's as high, based on standard intelligence tests, as those who graduate. For them, something has gone wrong. An article in *School Life* says three factors are particularly influential: a low academic aptitude, a slow rate of emotional and social development, and lack of parental interest in education.

One reason frequently given for failure and drop-out is the distraction of working to supplement the family income. Research has shown that grades do not necessarily suffer because the student is working part time. In fact, a survey in Illinois revealed that proportionately more among those who become graduates hold after school or Saturday jobs than do those who drop out. Some students find that the hours spent in gainful employment provide needed recreation and a rest from school work. Their mental health is made better by the gratification of doing socially useful work.



## *Parents' responsibility*

A philosopher once said: "Children are loved for the ample reason that they are children, and because children are fragrant and beautiful and full of the untold possibilities of becoming." But parental love is not a passive thing. It must be alive and even pushful.

To love children is to wish the best for them and to take the action that will assure its becoming available. Nothing can be more meaningful in life than knowledge, and the gaining of knowledge starts as early as your reading aloud the bedtime story. By stimulating curiosity through stories, you awaken the child's desire to learn. You make him thirsty now so that you shall not have to force him to drink later.

You cannot inoculate your child against failure, but you can give him emotional vitamins which will set up resistance to it. They build self-respect and self-confidence which fortify him against the temptation to quit.

Active interest by parents in school work is of the greatest help as an incentive to study. It will not take up much time of an evening to impart a sense of the benefits of learning, and it is time well spent when your child's future is at stake.

Interest in school work should continue without break until graduation day. Praise the child whenever he merits it; pin up his first grade pictures on a wall without being jocular about them; find out from the school what its requirements are in the way of homework, and be firm about home study, but don't nag; be willingly available to explain and give information; expect to see marked test-papers and then help the child to fill in the missing knowledge; encourage conversation about school work at meals and at other times. Do not forget that though the sums are easy to you, the stories familiar, and the history old stuff, to your child all these are new and challenging. To add 4 and 5 is a triumph at one age, just as it is an achievement to extract a square root at another age.

Give your child the best possible environment for studying. He should have a separate room, or at least a quiet study corner where he will not be disturbed by the rest of the family or by radio and television.

If your child should fail, consider whether he is over-matched by the course he is taking. You may be able to head off further hurt, even tragedy, by transferring him to a new setting. Merely to make a change from an environment where he has failed to an environment where he may cut a niche for himself might be a determining factor in making a come-back.

Common sense, thoughtfulness, good-heartedness and a little time: these are the ingredients of parent help. It has been suggested that parents should get together at two or three meetings during the school year to talk about methods. In discussion with teachers and guidance workers they would learn to give leadership without meddling and help without pampering.

They would hear about the danger of over-indulgence. Some children are given so many possessions and privileges that they do not learn the essential connection between effort and reward.

Sloth is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, responsible for a great deal of the failing and underachieving we see, but idling away one's time is not enjoying life. "Not to be occupied and not to exist amount to the same thing," said Voltaire. And Emerson followed up with "God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please — you can never have both."

## *A national problem*

Education should be regarded as the chief domestic issue of the decade. Its aim is to develop every pupil's ability to live usefully in society and to meet successfully the demands which society has a right to make upon him. Education is for individual excellence and happiness, for a society of equals, for a government of free men, for security and plenty, and for beauty.

Education in Canada is looked upon as a right, available to all children. The true democratic ideal is not equal distribution of education to all, but equal opportunity in proportion to capacity. The pupil is not to be a passive receiver, like a barrel being filled through a funnel, but must make a serious effort to take in what is offered.

What a child learns at school is capital, to be invested and drawn upon all through life. If he resists, he should be taught that many things are eventually useful, though not immediately convertible.

Education provides knowledge by which the student may guide himself in the best development of his capacity for efficient and happy living. It is not true to say that this education is becoming more complex, but it would be true to say that because society is becoming more complex it is necessary that education be more complete.

## *What to do*

A forceful endeavour should be made by everyone who feels concern for children and their future to find a positive way of meeting the challenge.

It is not enough to catch failing and underachieving students in their final year in high school. The unskilled readers, the potential drop-outs, the slothful students, should be detected early and corrective measures taken. As the Assistant Superintendent of Schools for Vancouver wrote a few years ago: "Failure for a poor student should be delayed long enough so that he might learn enough to be made into a good citizen."

Our obligation is to impress upon the student that he faces certain needs which are inescapable. We should show him the causes of his failure and the possibility of their being removed. We should provide him



with a programme that gives promise of successful activity in his educational, vocational and social future.

A whole-hearted getting together of parents, teachers, boards of education and persons interested in social services would start the ball rolling. This is not a task for the schools alone, but one whose successful completion demands the co-operative effort of all the community.

Union members who are willing to talk to students about the qualifications needed for jobs can perform a real service. Positions requiring knowledge and skill are going begging, while young men and women who failed to obtain the necessary education are unable to get work. YMCA's, YWCA's, YMHA's, boys' clubs, and other agencies serving youth can, through their study groups, bring home the desirability of having every boy and girl pursue education to the extent of his and her capacity.

Some youth centres have provided study rooms for those who have not quiet corners at home. Others have arranged for bright senior students to coach younger ones who have bogged down in some subject. A stimulating project by a "domestic peace corps" in Philadelphia may blaze a path for others to follow. One hundred and seventy-five college students have volunteered to coach youngsters who need extra help.

When United States schools opened last year, thousands of students who had dropped out, or who intended to drop out, returned to their class-rooms. Their return was brought about by the campaign conducted at the urging of the late President Kennedy with the help of \$250,000 from his Emergency Fund. Campaign workers got into touch with 59,300 drop-outs and potential drop-outs, of whom 51 per cent, or 30,361, returned to school. The most impressive results were obtained from effort by schools, welfare agencies, business men, parents, employment agencies, churches, and news media when they planned together for complementary activities. Students gave various reasons for returning to school, but chief among them was the personal interest shown in them by the community.

In Canada, an exhaustive survey was made by the Canadian Education Association's Research Committee on Practical Education during three years ending in 1951. The *Globe and Mail* observed last year: "Little has been found since that was not encompassed by this study." The survey, sponsored by 57 Canadian firms and other organizations, led by the Canadian Bankers Association, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, the Canadian Congress of Labour, and the Canadian Manufacturers Association, encompassed the academic and post-academic careers of 12,124 high school graduates and 14,219 drop-outs. Said J. Bascom St. John in the *Globe and Mail* of the findings and recommendations twelve years after the survey: "They could have been made the basis of a new era in Canadian education, and they could have given us a head start on the needs which now rise before us in crucial urgency, but neither

the politicians who run our governments, nor the professional educators who advise them, had the initiative to take the steps required."

### *Adult failures*

Adults, too, may be failing or underachieving, although their failure does not show up in marks on examination papers. If they are not coping with their children's difficulties, if they are bewildered by events without doing something positive to understand them, they are failing. They have not matched themselves with the day's needs.

About the time their children are born, the parents' active curiosity in the world around them fades. They begin to digest the data they have collected and put it together to build a simplified working model of the universe to which they will refer for the rest of their lives — and through which their children will first become acquainted with the world.

That process cannot continue with satisfaction. Society is becoming more complicated, puzzling and demanding, not only for the children of today but for the adults of today. Everyone must keep on learning if he is to secure maximum self-realization and fulfil his duties as a parent and as a citizen.

To be ignorant is not a crime, but to abide in ignorance when it can be avoided: that is a crime against oneself. From inexpensive paperback books and educational television to the variety of courses offered by community institutions and universities, there are myriad ways beckoning Canadians to catch up and keep up.

Every normal adult feels a deep-rooted necessity for completion. We wish to fulfil our potential for happiness to the utmost. As Donald C. Peattie wrote in *An Almanac for Moderns*: "Life is adventure in experience, and when you are no longer greedy for the last drop of it, it means no more than that you have set your face, whether you know it or not, to the day when you shall depart without a backward look."

### *No niggling physis*

Is it possible to cure the illness afflicting so many of our young people without causing pain? There will have to be readjustment, and it will have to be spread over all the organs affected — the children, the parents, the schools and society. It should, however, be less painful than some people fear: more, in fact, an overcoming of laziness and inertia and prejudice and custom than a severe operation.

But this is not the moment for the bedside manner and a niggling bottle of physis. Both young and old, we need the adventurous daring to accept ourselves as bundles of possibilities, and undertake the most interesting task in the world — making the most of our best and expecting more of ourselves.